

MEMORANDUM

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

March 23, 1971

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

FROM: Jeanne W. Davis

SUBJECT: Large Staff Meeting March 23, 9:45 - 10:27 A. M. - LAOS

Mr. Kissinger: I thought we might have a brief session on where we stand on Laos -- what was achieved and what was not achieved -- and give you an opportunity to ask questions.

As I told you at the beginning of the operation, the basic concept was to interdict the enemy's supplies so as to prevent or delay an offensive in this dry season and to push it as far back as possible into the next dry season. We were attempting both in the south and in Laos to interdict as much as we could. The operation in the south has proceeded at a fairly steady pace with some impact. In the north in military terms the North Vietnamese, when confronted with the threat, threw in almost all the forces they had available. They drew a division from South Vietnam and their entire strategic reserve from North Vietnam. This resulted in a much larger enemy force than we anticipated. The South Vietnamese were consistently outnumbered, and the nature of the terrain means that they were even more outnumbered at any one point because of the difficulty in reinforcing and other factors. The South Vietnamese fought extremely well. Of the 22 battalions involved, 18 did well and only four were in various degrees of trouble. It was interesting to me that all the soldiers photographed clinging to the helicopter landing gear were carrying their rifles and their gear. This was not the behavior of soldiers in a state of panic. This is the best estimate of the fighting performance of the South Vietnamese by Al Haig and others who have been over there during this period.

Of course, there were many military problems. This was the first time the South Vietnamese had undertaken a large-scale offensive action without American advisers and American ground observers. The coordination between tactical air and combat units was not as good as it might have been. And I'm not sure there was a full understanding of the strategic concept underlying the operation. However, if we assess the success of Vietnamization based on this operation in terms of combat

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performance under conditions of inadequate air support, the lack of overwhelming strategic direction, and almost constant movement without a quickly discernible pattern, on the whole they did extremely well.

Let us consider the impact in terms of attrition of forces and of logistics. The ARVN suffered 1000 dead and about 4000 wounded. In every previous engagement, the ratio of North Vietnamese casualties has been 7 to 1. The body count in this case is about 12,000. Normally I don't take the body count too seriously, but in this case I think it is probably low. There were massive air attacks, B-52s and tactical air attacks, in zones where enemy forces had to be by the nature of their attack pattern. Enemy casualties must have been extremely high. General Abrams thinks 8 out of 10 units were severely hurt, and common sense tells us that this is probably true. No South Vietnamese units ran. Where fire bases were lost, it was only after protracted fighting and the casualties must have been enormous.

If the enemy strategy was to hold substantial combat forces in Laos to protect against an incursion and to move into the northern part of South Vietnam in the dry season, we can assume that the probability of such an offensive has been substantially reduced. The North Vietnamese didn't have 100-plus tanks in Tchepone to defend Tchepone. They were obviously intended to move into the flatlands. Therefore, the result of this operation has been to prevent a major North Vietnamese offensive in August or September, prior to the South Vietnamese elections.

In the matter of logistics, our intelligence community has behaved like a group of hysterical Talmudic scholars in the exegesis of some abstruse paragraph. Because their feelings were hurt at having been wrong on the amount of supplies coming in through Sihanoukville, they decided not to tell us anything. They said they knew their numbers were wrong, but they wouldn't tell us why and wouldn't say what was right. No matter how wrong last year's figures were on tonnage we should have been able to use last year as a base and to say that through-put this year was five times higher, or whatever the percentage was. Finally, Wayne Smith and Bob Sansom came up with a valid analytical model which gives us a realistic way of looking at the problem and should let us know what percentage of last year's through-put is getting into Cambodia and South Vietnam this year. The enemy had three sources of supply during the last dry season -- items coming in through Sihanoukville, purchases on the Cambodian economy and material coming through southern Laos. We know what came through Sihanoukville, not because of our intelligence community but because we captured the bills of lading. And we have some idea of what was purchased on the open market in Cambodia. Those two sources are no longer available. Therefore, in order to sustain a protracted war strategy in South Vietnam and Cambodia for the next dry

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season, the enemy will have to put through the same amount as last year on the trails, plus enough to replace material from the other two sources. They will have to put in four or five times more down the trails to get the same amount out at the other end, because of consumption along the way, attrition by air and other factors. We could debate how many trucks were killed coming down the trail, but that is irrelevant. Since we are counting with the same inaccuracy as last year and by the same criteria, we can estimate what has been destroyed this year in some percentage relationship to last year. They have kept 40-50,000 troops in Laos this year as opposed to 8000 last year. These had to be fed and supplied. A great deal of their input has been consumed in southern Laos by the troops held in preparation for the Lam Son offensive or the expected attack on the trail system. Also, we had the consistent interdiction of the trails during the operation as well as the consumption by four-plus enemy divisions of material moving through the system during the operation. This was in addition to the fact that there were simply more troops. Taken all together, on the basis of common sense, if not theology, so far the through-put has been a fraction of the through-put last year. With all these additional strains, it had to be reduced, and all the evidence we have tends to suggest that it has been. That is the basis for the President's statement yesterday that only 25% as much has gone through this year as last. Of course, as the South Vietnamese leave Laos, the logistic system will be repaired. But the caches destroyed by air or picked up on the ground were quite substantial -- about 30-40% of the scale in the Cambodian operation. The logistic disruption was considerable and we are now analyzing exactly how much.

So the results were twofold. Whatever offensive operations may be undertaken in MR-1 and MR-2 will be substantially smaller than they would have been without this operation, due to the disruption of their supplies, the destruction of the caches and the attrition of their forces. And, it is unlikely that they will be able to build up their stockpiles in MR-3 or MR-4 during this dry season to permit them to undertake major operations at the beginning of the next dry season. This means they will have to take a substantial portion of the next dry season to build up their supplies there, which is important for the withdrawal of American forces.

There are some potentially negative aspects of the operation in terms of the morale of the South Vietnamese and the possible impact on the South Vietnamese political situation, if Thieu should be attacked by his political opponents. We are told that South Vietnamese morale is not substantially impaired; indeed, that there is some improvement. I'm inclined to take this with a grain of salt; no one can tell until the troops are back in their base camps and the officers can reflect on the operation. I consider this is potentially negative. Morale in Hanoi has probably

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picked up. However, they know better than we do what a close thing it really was -- how close to the abyss they really were. They behaved in an uncharacteristically panicky way. They called for assistance from their big brothers and they have never done that before, even during the period of maximum bombing of the north. If Wayne Smith's analysis is correct, Hanoi's basic strategic situation has deteriorated. We don't know, however, whether their situation is sufficiently worse to get them to negotiate, or, indeed, what they would negotiate about, given the unfavorable situation they face in the countryside. They may prefer to take their chances on the withdrawal program rather than negotiate.

Laos Are there any questions?

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dictio Mr. Sonnenfeldt: I get at the universities and from the newspapers some difficulty with the relationship between the short-term spilling of blood and the longer-term expectations and effects of operations such as this one. How do you suggest we cope with this, short of putting the President on the line?

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we he Mr. Kissinger: All of us are working for the President and we are expected to behave with confidence and dignity during this period and not go about beating our breasts. Some of the breast-beating about the spilling of blood is totally irresponsible. Those 100 tanks and four divisions were not just resting in Tchepone. They would have come into South Vietnam later this year. It's interesting that we have exceeded in every respect the minority plank in the 1968 Democratic Party platform which was rejected at the Democratic convention. It was considered great wisdom to say at that time that the war should be turned over to those most concerned. Now, people are saying that it is immoral for us to put the South Vietnamese in a position to defend themselves. The slogan is no longer "end American participation in the war," but "end the war." The war can end only by negotiation or by someone's defeat. Since North Vietnam won't negotiate and since we can't defeat Hanoi under these ground rules, they argue that we must participate in the defeat of Saigon. Not only is it our obligation to disengage ourselves but to see to it that someone stops fighting. They are not urging us to get the North Vietnamese to stop fighting. They are urging us to get the South Vietnamese to stop fighting, and this we will not do. There are two alternatives: negotiate or put the South Vietnamese in a position to defend themselves. "End the war" is an appealing slogan, but the practical consequences would be to end the war on the other side's terms. I have no particularly bright ideas on how to cope with the point you raise, Hal, but we must be honest with ourselves.

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Mr. Levine: You noted the importance of the buildup by the enemy and the fact that the South Vietnamese were increasingly out-numbered. Why didn't more troops go in to prevent this situation from developing?

Mr. Kissinger: This relates in part to the organization of the South Vietnamese Army. There are two divisions in each Corps area, and these divisions normally do not fight well outside of their own area. You can't move them around as you can divisions in other armies. The South Vietnamese used their entire strategic reserve. They had two divisions disposable plus one which they took from I Corps which is contiguous to Laos. They might have used another division from I Corps and some of us thought they should have. But they judged that the necessity to retain political control in South Vietnam and the impact of heavy casualties were too great to commit the other division. They made a very heavy investment in this operation -- they put in their best divisions and all their strategic reserves.

Mr. Hyland: Will there be enough American forces left during the next dry season to support a similar operation?

Mr. Kissinger: There will certainly be fewer American forces in Vietnam in the next dry season and it is unlikely the South Vietnamese could conduct this exact type of operation on their own in the next dry season. I have only recently become an expert on the routes through southern Laos, but I know now that you don't necessarily have to interdict the supply route at Tchepone. You could mount raids against other points further down at less cost and with increased capability. It is unlikely the North Vietnamese will get a free shot at uninterrupted supplies from now on.

Mr. Negroponete: Were you impressed by how quickly the North Vietnamese reinforced?

Mr. Kissinger: Yes, the North Vietnamese fought an extremely intelligent campaign. They reinforced quickly, they knew what they were doing and they behaved very effectively. They threw in practically their entire effective army. They had only a holding force in Cambodia. The toll must have been very heavy.

Mr. Lehman: Did the intelligence community know there were 100 tanks there?

Mr. Kissinger: No. If they did, they didn't tell us.

Mr. Levine: Why do you think the effect might be negative?

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Mr. Kissinger: I was trying to be completely fair. I think the net impact over the period of a year will be a substantial plus if we keep our cool in this country. If you compare the effect of doing nothing with the results of this operation, over the period of a year we will be substantially better off. The supplies and units which have been destroyed or damaged would have been available this year and next, and you would have had the situation of American forces heading for their ships while the North Vietnamese were cranking up a major offensive. Their capability has been substantially reduced. The operation is a substantial plus, although not as decisive as some had hoped it would be. Compared to anything else we might have done, and considering our objectives, it was a very major plus. We will for the next few weeks take a tremendous amount of nagging, but we would have done so for a longer period in any event if we had not undertaken this operation.

Mr. Levine: What has been the reaction in South Vietnam?

Mr. Kissinger: So far it has been a tremendous plus; they consider it a big victory in South Vietnam. What happens when the feedback from this country gets to them, I can't predict. There could be some negative aspects, but I don't think enough to outweigh the achievements. Last year, people thought we were risking everything by going into Cambodia. If we hadn't, we would have been run out of South Vietnam by now. With the Americans pulling out of III and IV Corps we would have been in serious difficulty. We have had no great difficulty in the highlands this year and we have been building capability for next year. On that basis, even with the negative aspects, it has been a big plus. We had no choice but to do something to interdict the supply flow.

Mr. Droge: Are we doing any briefing of members of Congress?

Mr. Kissinger: We did a little yesterday, and Secretary Laird and Admiral Moorer are going up before the Committees.

Mr. Wright: Given the repositioning of North Vietnamese troops, the presence of tanks and the speed with which they reinforced, is there the possibility that the operation had leaked?

Mr. Kissinger: We assume anything the South Vietnamese do is penetrated. Our mistake was, knowing it was penetrated, that we went ahead with the original plan. It was thought harder to change the plan than to pull it off. For some reason we have never tried to use the system of making a plan and, while it is running, to divert the operation in another direction. This was not in itself decisive, however. We did achieve major disruption of the enemy's logistic strength and major attrition of their forces.

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